

## A NOTE ON THOMAS GRAY'S *ELEGY*

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### I

Reading Thomas Gray's poems and letters in chronological order,<sup>1</sup> when I came to the *Elegy written in a Country Church-Yard* (1751), I was deeply impressed that something that had been long troubling him in the innermost part of his mind was finally settled when he wrote the poem.

What was the something that troubled him? What sufferings did the *Elegy* settle?

Needless to say the *Elegy* is one of the most important works in eighteenth century English literature. There is no history of English literature that does not make any comment on the poem, and we have a number of critical essays and monographs on it. Yet most of the literary historians, though understanding the importance of the poem in the history of English poetry, stop explaining their appreciation and criticism halfway. They admire the fine descriptions of the English evening scene, the feeling towards the fate of death common to all people, the grand style with its dignified and sonorous rhythm of iambic pentameter and apt imageries; then they turn their attention to the melancholic emotion implied in the poem, and to the democratic thought hinted in the notion that death falls on everybody, rich and poor, high and low, which prematurely reflects the transition of thought in the English society at the time; until at last they almost unanimously go back to the famous observation of Dr. Johnson:

"In the character of his *Elegy* I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtlety and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours. The *Churchyard* abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo".<sup>2</sup>

No doubt the *Elegy* contains something difficult to deal with, to discuss. First, the poem is full of poetical allusions, so is sometimes called 'a mosaic poem'. To borrow apt expressions from the classics and from the works of senior poets is the literary device that comes into existence naturally when poetical technique has developed to a considerable degree, and is in a sense one of the fundamentals of the classical art of poetry. Alexander Pope, leading poet in the early eighteenth century, gives his poetic principle as follows;

"True wit is nature to advantage dress'd,  
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> except Latin poems.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Johnson: *Lives of the Poets*.

<sup>3</sup> *An Essay on Criticism* (II, 296-7).

The couplet can be amplified in this way: that the universal truths were clearly and definitely described by the classical poets since Homer. Modern poets could only add some beauty to those expressions. When we compare this impersonal attitude with the Romantics' aspiration after "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", we might say that the former is like a mediaeval potter who was always following the pattern and the baking method of his predecessors, while the latter resembles a Renaissance painter who freely used oil colours and boldly created his own dazzling world. The potter conceals his individuality under the tasty tints which he inherited from his seniors. The quality of the *Elegy* that makes it difficult to deal with lies there, first of all. And secondly, Gray wrote little poetry, which fact makes it hard to grasp his poetic quality. Although he wrote many letters, he 'never spoke out' his personal feelings and thoughts clearly. These things also make the poem difficult to discuss.

However, we have at least two pieces of critical writing on the *Elegy* that have their own merits. One is Mr. Cleanth Brooks' "Gray's Storied Urn",<sup>4</sup> and the other is Mr. F. W. Bateson's "Gray's *Elegy* Reconsidered"<sup>5</sup> which starts from the Brooks' essay and develops its own theme. It might safely be said that it was these two essays that looked into the mysterious beauty of the poem for the first time in English critical history, but, to my mind, they have a common defect; that both adhere to the poem itself. Mr. Brooks, as a New Critic, pays little attention to the social and historical background of the poem and probes into its 'structure'. In the poem we find a number of eighteenth century poetic dictions and personifications, and Brooks examines the nature of the dictions and the structure of metaphors. He says that such personifications as "Ambition" and "Grandeur" are 'ironies', and that the poem as a whole is an ironical description of the country churchyard in contrast to the abbey where the rich and the great are buried.

In the meantime Mr. Bateson sees the defect of Brooks' essay in his neglect of the social and historical background of the poem. The *Elegy* had been completed in a certain form once, was revised and some stanzas added after several years' interval. Mr. Bateson takes this fact seriously, examines the process of the revision and recognizes in the background of the poem the poet's own personal feelings and the transitional thoughts in the English society of the period. He concludes that the poet endeavoured to render the personal feelings universal.

These two essays contain excellent suggestions. We have neither time nor space here to argue about their critical methods, one in sheer opposition to the other. I am going to show by further investigation from my standpoint, that the poem contains something that needs consideration not only of the work itself but also of its place in the development of Gray's inner life. It can not of course be said that their critical attitudes are wrong. The point is merely that they do not explain my idea that the main characteristics of the *Elegy* can be grasped only by referring back to the poet's personal history. It is true that Mr. Bateson takes the background of the writing of the *Elegy* seriously, and considers Gray's quarrel with Horace Walpole and the death of Richard West, but he pays attention only to those facts which are directly related to the poem, and never touches upon the poet's unspoken prayer for life.

<sup>4</sup> Cleanth Brooks: *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947).

<sup>5</sup> F. W. Bateson: *English Poetry* (1952).

## II

Gray's fame as one of the most important poets in the history of English literature depends upon the *Elegy*. He wrote only a few pieces of poetry, and he led retiring, quiet life like a hermit. Since childhood he had been threatened by an inferiority complex that kept him out of ordinary human society and the harmonious order of nature. He continued to watch this inner maladjustment to the end of his life.

"When You have seen one of my days, you have seen a whole year of my life; they go round and round like the blind horse in the mill, only he has the satisfaction of fancying he makes a progress and gets some ground".<sup>6</sup>

"Low spirits are my true and faithful companions; they get up with me, go to bed with me, make journeys and returns as I do."<sup>7</sup>

"Mine, you are to know, is a white Melancholy, or rather Leucocholy for the most part; which though it seldom laughs or dances, nor ever amounts to what one calls Joy or Pleasure, yet is a good easy sort of a state, and *ça ne laisse que de s'amuser*. The only fault of it is insipidity, which is apt now and then to give a sort of Ennui, which makes one form certain little wishes that signify nothing."<sup>8</sup>

This kind of melancholy and inanimate state Gray continued to tell his closest friend.

Thomas Gray was born the son of a London merchant, who was not a little of violent character, often ill-treating his wife. Out of the twelve children the poet alone attained manhood. Such family circumstances cast a shadow on the poet's early childhood. However, he enjoyed a happy time with a few intimate friends at Eton. The Quadruple Alliance, with Horace Walpole and Richard West among the members, built a quiet and gentle society of their own apart from the other robust and spirited Eton boys, and was a great comfort to such a delicate disposition as Gray's. Fortune, however, soon began to frown upon him when Gray, during the Grand Tour with the Premier's son Horace, quarrelled with his companion and returned to England alone. In a short time he lost his dearest friend, Richard West. Thus the separation from these two close friends made Gray's feeling of maladjustment intense and definite. His life since then was to be constructed by the taciturn determination to make his private life independent and perfect in its own way. Gray got interested in various fields of learning and art as well as living aspects of nature, and some of his research was said to be the deepest in his age. Though he was called 'the most learned man in Europe',<sup>9</sup> he seldom made his great erudition public, refused the poet laureateship, and never gave lectures when he was appointed the Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge.

We cannot deny that the circumstances of the age rendered his feeling of maladjustment more intense. To generalize the trends of thought of any age is dangerous, but, as to the intellectual atmosphere of the time, we can observe at least, that the remarkable advance of European culture since the Renaissance was based upon the deep interest and sincere belief

<sup>6</sup> Letter to West, Dec. 20, 1735.

<sup>7</sup> Letter to West, Aug. 22, 1737.

<sup>8</sup> Letter to West, May 27, 1742.

<sup>9</sup> W.J. Temple's article in *The London Magazine*, 1772, March.

in human reason; and through the works of the seventeenth century thinkers, such as Hobbes, Locke and Newton, we can clearly see one strong tendency of thought, i.e. rationalism. In the field of literature, the same sense of the rationalistic order can be traced in the works of Dryden and Pope, who were under the influence of the French classical school. Pope had a view that there worked in nature as well as in human beings the divine law that ordered the movements of the heavenly bodies, and consequently human society was under the established order of a morality. These morals were universal truths, to which Pope gave fine expressions in his *Essay on Man* and other works. Man in society was considered far more important than man in solitude, and to express one's solitary grief and other personal feelings was avoided in poetry.

It can easily be imagined that Gray, who was experiencing solitary griefs in his maladjustment with the outside world, could neither bear the too intellectual and cold atmosphere of the age nor accept Pope's view of poetry. What sort of poetry could such a poet write? In Gray's poems we could perceive the agony of the man who resisted the conventions of the age.

In 1742, when, at the age of twenty-five, Gray quarrelled with Walpole and suffered the death of West, he wrote a number of poems, unusual for his reticent character.

In vain to me the Smileing Mornings shine,  
And redning Phoebus lifts his golden Fire;

.....

*Sonnet on the Death of Richard West* is a lyrical cry that must have released the poet's personal grief on the death of his close friend. The purity of his grief is intensified in contrast to the beauty of nature. This sonnet is the only poem among Gray's works that gave the personal sentiments a spontaneous overflow, and it is in this fine contrast that we see the poet's technique to release his personal feelings. But at the same time, it must be noticed that a poet of such fine technique and strong passion took more roundabout ways of description in almost all other poems. For instance, let us read *Ode on the Spring*. A poem on the theme of spring is generally expected to express an admiration of the return of new life or the natural beauty in spring. In the first stanza Gray describes the beauty of spring:

Lo! where the rosy-bosom'd Hours,  
Fair Venus' train appear,  
Disclose the long-expecting flowers,  
And wake the purple year!

Yet in the next stanza, instead of praising the beauty of spring, he sits on the rushy bank with the Muse, who thinks that

How vain the ardour of the Crowd,  
How low, how little are the Proud,  
How indigent the Great!

This negative contemplation upon the season of birth and growth is strange enough. Gray proceeds to say that, when he sees insects busy on the wing, he cannot help pitying the fate of man who also works busily till death. In conclusion he depicts his own solitary figure, rather like a mature moralist.

Me thinks I hear in accents low  
 The sportive kind reply:  
 Poor moralist! and what art thou?  
 A solitary fly?

Mr. Graham Hough is right when he criticizes, "And here, surely, is what the poem is really about; what Gray really wants to do—to contrast the free and fluent energy of spring with his own solitary and constricted life, so deficient in the sources of joy. And this is the only way he can do it: only after four stanzas of conventional description and conventional moralizing can he even begin to say what he wants, and then only under the guise of a rather rococo joke".<sup>10</sup>

We must notice here, as was mentioned before, that there was no poetic convention for a poet to release personal feelings in this age. Lord David Cecil's reference to Horace Walpole's words upon hearing the news of the King George I's death might well be remembered. He tells us, "At Eton, on one occasion, he found himself bursting into a torrent of tears at the thought of George I's death, largely so he tells us, because the son of the Prime Minister ought to be especially moved by such an event".<sup>11</sup> There *was* the conscious form even in lamentation. One of the characteristics of the Augustan society was that the conventions in social life were established and decorum was required by the social custom of the age. And the sense of moral order or good sense was required in poetry too. Poets could not indulge in their own sentiments but they had to sublimate them into universal truths, thus appealing to gentlemen in public.

Anyway, in whatever well-mannered and roundabout way Gray may have written *Ode on the Spring*, it should be noticed that the poet's mind is maintaining its equilibrium, in decided contrast between nature's energy and his personal grief. That is to say, Gray, not revolting against the conventions of the age but rather obeying its sense of order, only betrayed his personal feelings.

This is also the case with *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College* and *Hymn to Adversity*. In the *Eton Ode*, Gray invokes the antique towers, the silver-winding Thames and the field of lawn and groves, and then reflects upon the life of young students playing in high spirits there. And here again, he anticipates the dark shadows of misfortune, fear, despair and sorrow lying in ambush for them.

Yet see how all around 'em wait  
 The Ministers of human fate,  
 And black Misfortune's baleful train!  
 Ah, shew them where in ambush stand  
 To seize their prey, the murth'rous band!  
 Ah, tell them, they are men!

.....

In this ode, as in *Ode on the Spring*, Gray contrasted his own pessimistic view of life with the youth's high-spirited, innocent life, and in the process of moralizing succeeded in releasing his grief. In the *Adversity Ode*, too, he argues that adversity falls on everybody,

<sup>10</sup> Graham Hough: *The Romantic Poets* (Hutchinson), p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Lord David Cecil: *Two Quiet Lives* (Constable), p. 87.

but that it helps to foster human virtues. It seems that here Gray is soothing his utter solitude with his own pessimistic view of life.

The writing of these poems did not heal the poet's solitude completely—solitude of maladjustment with nature and human society. It helped to release part of the deep sorrow, and nothing more. To put an end to the feeling of maladjustment definitely, it was necessary for the poet to have deeper contemplation on mortal fate as well as sharper insight into the changing thought of the age. And it was the writing of the *Elegy* that did it.

### III

The Curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,  
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,  
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

These opening lines of the *Elegy* appear to be a fine description of the quiet country churchyard at the fall of dusk. But we must not overlook the poet's technique to bring the readers' mind into resignation by alluding to Dante<sup>12</sup> and describing the atmosphere of the grave. Again Mr. Hough is right in remarking that "Gray is here far less concerned with nature as an object of contemplation than with his readers—the readers whom he wishes to lull into a resigned, acquiescent, summerevening frame of mind".<sup>13</sup>

After the description of the evening churchyard, Gray proceeds to contemplate on the rural people buried there, until at last he comes to what he really wants to say, that neither the ambitious nor the powerful, nor the rich nor the noble, can mock the fate of the common people who are buried in the country tombs, for the ambitious and the likes also are falling to the same fate.

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,  
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;  
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile,  
The short and simple annals of the poor.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r,  
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,  
Awaits alike th' inevitable hour.  
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

England in the mid-eighteenth century was apparently stable in her social and political condition, but in the meantime the undercurrent was changing. The opposition of the Tory to the Whig was becoming intense, and in accordance with Rousseau's radical thoughts beyond the Strait of Dover, there was arising a tendency to reject conservatism and advocate the perfectibility of all men. The Whigs, representing the middle class, gained influence gradually. Those stanzas quoted above seem to show the sensitive reflection of the transition of the English society at the time. Gray, in spite of his hermit-like appearance, always paid attention

<sup>12</sup> In his own notes, Gray refers to Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

<sup>13</sup> Graham Hough: *op. cit.*, p. 14.

to general affairs around him, and it may not be wrong to point out that the poet is here preaching democracy. Mr. Bateson and other literary historians say that democratic thought is the main motive of this poem. But it would be dangerous to put a special emphasis upon the poet's idea in the *Elegy*; for Gray gave utterance to his inner feeling in the following several stanzas.

Death that comes to everyone, rich and poor, high and low, is a part of the order of nature. We have seen before that Gray was, in his earlier poems, intensely conscious of the maladjustment of his ego towards nature and human society. Now would it not be right to say that while composing the *Elegy* (1742-50), he was feeling the maladjustment to be vanishing in his consciousness of the fate of death—destruction that consists in the order of nature?

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,  
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast  
The little Tyrant of his fields withstood;  
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,  
Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.

With the depth of meaning in the beautiful images and metaphors, these stanzas describing the rustic people vanishing unnoticed are the best part of the *Elegy*.

Gray began to write the *Elegy* in 1742, when Richard West died. There was a fashion in English poetry at that time to pick themes about the contemplation on death, melancholy and the grave. While Pope, Swift and Defoe took part in political affairs, and making use of the pen for the party strife, were writing keen satires, a number of meditative poets appeared, who, retiring in the country far from London, endeavoured to enrich their private lives in quiet. Thomas Parnell published *Night Piece on Death* in 1721, Edward Young his *Night Thoughts* in 1742, and Robert Blair *The Grave* in 1743. Amy Reed's *The Background of Gray's Elegy*<sup>14</sup> and Norman Callan's "Augustan Reflective Poetry"<sup>15</sup> persuade us that Gray's *Elegy* can be put in the lineage of the reflective and melancholic poems of the age. However, it would be going too far to consider the *Elegy* merely a poem on a fashionable theme. Gray spent most of his time in academic seclusion at Cambridge, but occasionally he went out to Stoke Poges near Eton where his mother and aunt lived. The churchyard of the *Elegy* is usually identified with that of the Stoke Poges Church, and Gray must have had chances to observe the farmers' lives nearabout.<sup>16</sup> No doubt the direct motive of his writing the *Elegy* is the death of West, and the poet's desire to complete the work might have been urged by the death of his aunt, but we assume that Gray felt his long-suffering maladjustment with nature and human society being gradually healed by his deep sympathy towards the obscure countrymen who were to return to dust without obtaining power or wealth.

All mortals return to dust. Gray must have dissolved his defeatism and maladjustment into the consciousness of the mortal fate.

<sup>14</sup> Columbia University Press, 1924.

<sup>15</sup> in Boris Ford (ed.): *Pelican Guide to English Literature 4*. From Dryden to Johnson.

<sup>16</sup> cf. Ketton-Cremer: *Thomas Gray, A Biography*, pp. 95-97.

As was stated before, the *Elegy* had been finished once in a certain form and was for some years untouched. Afterwards Gray revised and added a number of stanzas, the result being 32 stanzas in 128 lines as a whole. When we read the Eton Manuscript which was written before the revision, we can clearly see how Gray tried to dispose of the troubled feelings inside himself. Here are the last two stanzas of the Eton Manuscript.

Hark! how the sacred Calm, that broods around,  
Bids ev'ry fierce tumultuous Passion cease;  
In still small Accents whisp'ring from the ground,  
A grateful Earnest of eternal peace.

No more with Reason and thyself at strife,  
Give anxious Cares and endless Wishes room;  
But thro' the cool sequester'd Vale of Life  
Pursue the silent Tenour of thy Doom.

Before the revision, the *Elegy* was in 22 stanzas, 88 lines. Thirteen stanzas, 52 lines were added to them in the revision. In the Eton Manuscript, the poet is trying to persuade his own passion into yielding to fate "to pursue the silent tenour of the doom", while in the revised version he goes on to describe the epitaphs of the common people, and brings his elegy to a finish by an epitaph for a man much like himself. There have been disputes whether the revision was successful or not. We are not dealing with the matter now, but so far as style is concerned, the text before revision is more impersonal, while the stanzas added in the revision contain something sentimental as Professor Rintaro Fukuhara judges.<sup>17</sup>

No farther seek his merits to disclose,  
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,  
(There they alike in trembling hope repose,)  
The bosom of his Father and his God.

This is the last stanza of the epitaph. Gray had dissolved his feeling of maladjustment in the first half of the poem. When we have finished reading through the whole poem to the epitaph, we feel not only the poet's sympathy to the fate of common people, but even his admiration towards the destiny of mortal death.

As was mentioned before, a figure like Gray himself is described in the epitaph. And now with his soul reposing in the bosom of God, he looks down upon the human world far below, thus relieving himself of the secular worries such as rank in society, wealth and power. He has completed freeing himself from his inner trouble. Thus Gray saved himself definitely, by writing and revising the *Elegy*, that is, by presupposing his own death and epitaph.

After the *Elegy*, Gray never expressed his personal emotion in poetry. Only one exception is *Ode on the Pleasure arising from Vicissitude* (c. 1754), where the poet is concerned more about pleasure and comfort than about grief and misery behind them. It seems that after the *Elegy* he came to seek poetic inspiration chiefly in the sources of history, i. e. the history of mankind, of Britain, and of poetry. *The Bard* and *The Progress of Poesy* (1757), two of his most laboured works, and *The Descent of Odin* (1768) and other translations, are mainly concerned with historical interest.

<sup>17</sup> Rintaro Fukuhara: "Thomas Gray's *Elegy*: Its Scheme of Composition", 1930. (*Essays on Thomas Gray*, Kenkyusha, 1960.)